

Historical Frontier Forts of Texas

The Lone Star State boasts a unique culture formed by its rich history and journey to statehood. Throughout Texas history, whether during exploration, colonization, revolution or expansion, Texans stayed busy establishing forts, presidios, military camps, barracks and stockades to ward off potential enemies, some of which are still standing. The state honors the frontier lives at dozens of sites where visitors can take a step back in time and get a glimpse at what life on the frontier was really like.

In San Angelo, [Fort Concho](#) was established in 1867 and still stands today. Built on the banks of the Concho River, the Fort served as regimental headquarters for some of the most recognized frontier units in Texas history, including the 10th Cavalry known as the Buffalo Soldiers. Fort Concho soldiers patrolled the Texas frontier for nearly 22 years, providing the nearby community of San Angelo a chance to grow and prosper. Despite its closure in 1889, surviving structures include 23 original buildings, now restored and preserved as a National Historic Landmark. Barracks, headquarters, the hospital, and officer residences serve as museum, exhibit halls, offices, visitor center, and archives for much of the surviving artifacts related to Fort occupation. In addition, the landmark Fort [hosts a re-creation](#) of Company A of the 10th Cavalry, the infamous Buffalo Soldier regiment comprised entirely of African American enlisted men. Reenactments, performed by volunteers, include uniforms and procedures accurate to the period. The Fort also sponsors a lively calendar of festivals and celebrations throughout the year, including Buffalo Soldier Heritage Day and Fort Concho Frontier Day.

The military has played a key role in San Antonio's development since 1718, and it remains one of the largest employers in town today. The city's first permanent U.S. military installation, [Fort Sam Houston](#), is a National Historic Landmark and home of the Fort Sam Houston Museum in San Antonio. The United States Army first established a presence in San Antonio at Camp Almus near the [Alamo](#) in October 1845 when the Republic of Texas was in the process of becoming a state. In addition to a small garrison, the post at San Antonio included a quartermaster depot. In 1890 the post at San Antonio was designated Fort Sam Houston in honor of Gen. Sam Houston. Additionally, many of the top commanders during World War I were Fort Sam Houston alumni.

The 3,434-acre Fort Sam Houston affords visitors an unusual opportunity to view the city's military past while in an active military environment, as the fort currently hosts the Army Medical Command and the headquarters of the Fifth Army. Most of its historic buildings are still in use and thus off-limits, but three are open to the public. Housed in a 1905 mess hall, the museum's artifacts and photos survey fort history from its 1845 inception to the present. Fort Sam Houston also encompasses the [U.S. Army Medical Department Museum](#). As the nation's only Army medical museum, the 40,000-square-foot facility traces military medical advances and their impact on national healthcare.

At [Pioneer Village](#) in Gonzales, about an hour's drive from San Antonio, the Village is best known as the site of the first clash of the Texas Revolution. A cannon, borrowed from the Mexican government, became a catalyst for Anglo settlers in the town. When Mexican authorities sent soldiers to retrieve the cannon in 1835, settlers rallied around a defiant, now well-known call: "Come and take it." Today, the [Gonzales Memorial Museum](#) is home to the cannon and the sprawling layout of buildings including a barn, a granary, two houses, a cabin, a school, an opry stage, a saloon and various shops. The village is open for self-guided and guided group tours, which offer a glimpse into daily life on the range.

In West Texas, [Fort Davis](#) is one of the best surviving examples of a frontier military post in the Southwest. From 1854 to 1891, the fort was strategically located to protect immigrants, mail coaches, and freight wagons on the Trans-Pecos portion of the San Antonio-El Paso Road and on the Chihuahua Trail. The Fort's location, at the mouth of a box canyon on the eastern side of the Davis Mountains, provided a suitable advantage for fending off attacks from Native Americans, mustering troops, and staging defenses. It is a vivid reminder of the significant role played by the military in the settlement and development of the western frontier. Named for Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, the fort was first garrisoned by Lieutenant Colonel Washington Seawell and six companies of the Eighth U.S. Infantry.

After 1867, when troops of the Ninth United States Cavalry reoccupied the fort, the town of Fort Davis became "the most important town in the Trans-Pecos country," by virtue of its position at the crossroads of two important trails and its status as a base for travelers and hunters. Other settlers who came with the return of the troops included storekeeper Dan Murphy, butcher Sam R. Miller, and baker Whitaker Keesey, who later became the most influential merchant in Fort Davis. Sgt. Charles Mulhern, a native of County Donegal, Ireland, arrived in the late 1870s and eventually acquired a substantial amount of land in the area; he and Gen. Benjamin Grierson, who retired to Fort Davis in 1890, were the only military men who became important local landowners. In the 1880s Fort Davis became a ranching center, as ambitious cattlemen poured into the Trans-Pecos.

By the end of the 1880s, Fort Davis harbored more than 100 structures and quartered more than 400 soldiers, including the famed Buffalo Soldiers. Twenty four buildings remain today, five of which are restored to their 1800s condition, along with over 100 ruins and foundations. Self-guided tours, hiking and special events highlight the Fort's year-round interpretive program.

Holding command over the Southern Plains, [Fort Griffin](#) was part of a line of western defensive forts from 1867 to 1881. On July 31, 1867, Lt. Col. Samuel D. Sturgis and four companies of the 6th Cavalry established a new post high on a plateau, overlooking a bend of the Clear Fork of the Brazos River to the northeast. First designated as Camp Wilson, the name of the post was changed to Fort Griffin in honor of Gen. Charles Griffin, the commander of the Department of Texas. Although the original intention was for all buildings on the grounds to be permanent stone structures, they retained a temporary appearance throughout their existence. In the beginning, log houses called "picket" huts (built with vertical logs), tents and rough frame buildings with earth and canvas roofs were erected as provisional shelter. The scarcity of materials, shortage of funds and daily demands of military duty allowed for only six of the more than 90 structures of the garrison to be built wholly of stone. Although Fort Griffin was known on the frontier to be a very tidy, disciplined place, it was an especially active fort and the troops were kept busy with protection and settlement of the frontier with little time for building construction or maintenance.

Remnants of the fort remain today at Fort Griffin State Historic Site near Albany, which is also home to the official Texas Longhorn Herd, offering opportunities for history buffs, outdoor enthusiasts, astronomers and families. Rock foundations, ruins and a few reconstructed buildings serve as a reminder of a once prominent 1800s fort. The campgrounds, located on the banks of the Clear Fork of the Brazos River, provide visitors with an opportunity to relax under large shade trees, enjoy the playground, catch catfish in the river or hike nature trails. Due to the vast ranches surrounding the property, Fort Griffin has minimal light pollution. The result is an astronomer's oasis with great skies for viewing constellations, planets and galaxies at Fort Griffin's monthly stargazing events.

Bailey English, founder of Fannin County, brought the first settlers to claim homesteads on the rich black land of the Red River Valley in March 1837. During the early years of the Republic of Texas, Fannin County residents lived in constant danger of Indian attack, and Fort English was a frequent refuge for settlers on the western edge of the Red River frontier. It was built in the summer of 1837 by Bailey English in the form of a single blockhouse, sixteen feet square and topped by an overhanging story twenty-four feet square, surrounded by a log stockade. Although it was private, [Fort English](#) played a role in several official campaigns against the Indians by the Army of the Republic of Texas. In November 1838 it served as the rendezvous point for the militia brigade of Gen. John H. Dyer during the Rusk-Dyer Indian expedition, and in October 1840 Col. William G. Cooke's troops straggled into Fort English after the near-disaster of the Military Road expedition.

The fort was used until 1843 when the Indians moved further west, and in 1976 a replica of Fort English was built as a Fannin County Bicentennial project. The replica includes three 1830's log cabins from the Fannin County area which have been furnished to represent a frontier cabin, trading post and a blacksmith shop. A restored doctor's buggy and military wagon are also on display in the stockade area. From April to September, groups can step back in time at Fort English village and see demonstrations of various pioneer activities, including lye soap making, broom making, candle making and various outdoor skills. Visitors may also participate in pioneer activities such as shelling and grinding corn, frontier games, drawing water and washing clothes.

From reenactments to preserving artifacts, the Lone Star State is sure to provide a great time for those looking to the past and present.